Fall 1993

Women, Family, and Utopia: The Oneida Community Experience and Its Implications for the Present

Lawrence Foster
Georgia Institute of Technology - Main Campus

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY ASSOCIATES

COURIER

OUT OF THE FOLD.
"Oh, dreadful! They dwell in peace and harmony, and have no church scandals. They must be wiped out."

VOLUME XXVIII, NUMBER 2, FALL 1993

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY ASSOCIATES COURIER

VOLUME XXVIII NUMBER TWO FALL 1993

Women, Family, and Utopia: The Oneida Community Experience and Its Implications for the Present

BY LAWRENCE FOSTER

EFFORTS TO DERIVE contemporary lessons from the past are always fraught with difficulty. Seldom has this been more true than in the case of John Humphrey Noyes and the community he founded in mid-nineteenth-century New York State. The Oneida Community and its system of "complex marriage", which both Noyes and his critics somewhat misleadingly described as "free love", have been the focus of extraordinarily wide and divergent interpretations over the past century and a half. These have ranged from extreme treatments arguing that Noyes and Oneida were part of the vanguard of sexual liberation and women's rights to comparisons of Noyes with Hitler, arguing that he and his community were highly repressive and destructive of human potential.[1] Elsewhere I have argued that most treatments of Noyes and his com-

Note: This essay incorporates some information that first appeared in my article "Free Love and Feminism: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community", *Journal of the Early Republic* 1 (Summer 1981): 165–83.

1. Among the analyses suggesting that Noyes and Oneida may have been a prototype for the future, see Robert Allerton Parker, *A Yankee Saint: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1935); Victor F. Calverton, "Oneida: The Love Colony", in his *Where Angels Dared to Tread: Socialist and Communist Utopian Colonies in the United States* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941), 245–87; Mulford Q. Sibley, "Oneida's Challenge to American Culture", in Joseph J. Kwiat and Mary C. Turpie, eds., *Studies in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), 41–62; and Richard A. Hoehn, "The Kingdom Goes Joint Stock: Learning from Oneida 100 Years Later", *Christian Century* 98 (28 January 1981): 77–80. Among the critical accounts, see especially Erik Achorn, "Mary Cragin: Perfectionist Saint", *New England Quarterly* 28 (1955): 490–518, which compares Noyes to Hitler; Ernest R. Sandeen, "John Humphrey Noyes as the New Adam", *Church History* 40 (March 1971): 82–90; Marlyn Hartzell Dalsimer, "Women and Family in the

munal experiments at Oneida can best be compared to a Rorschach test or to a mirror reflecting the hopes, fears, or preoccupations of the writers.[2] The Oneida experience was so complex and multifaceted that it seemingly can generate as many interpretations as the famous elephant that the blind men of Hindustan attempted so imperfectly to describe.

This brief essay in no way claims to identify what the significance of the Oneida Community experiment for the present really is or should be. Rather, I am drawing upon twenty-five years of reflection on the Oneida Community to present what to me have been some of the most salient issues raised by the Oneida experiment, which may have implications for dealing with our present sense of crisis in community life and relations between the sexes. I hope and trust that these brief thoughts will stimulate further sharing of the rich and divergent perspectives of others who have also sought to understand the Community and its ongoing significance. Although some of the specific *forms* Noyes introduced at Oneida may not be especially appealing to many of us today, even to Community descendants, I believe that the *philosophy* underlying Noyes's efforts at religious and social reconstruction may still have considerable contemporary resonance.

The most striking feature of John Humphrey Noyes's career to me was his keen sense of the responsibility of the intellectual or creative person for the social consequences of his ideas. Noyes was breaking down old and outmoded beliefs and ways of action, but he did not leave his followers to drift without guidelines. He provided new, if highly unconventional, standards and practices, and he took responsibility for seeing that these worked, or if not, that they were discarded or modified. Viewed externally, Oneida contained many bizarre or even dangerous features, tending toward

---

Oneida Community, 1837–1881" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1975); and Louis J. Kern, "Ideology and Reality: Sexuality and Women's Status in the Oneida Community", *Radical History Review* 20 (Spring/Summer 1979): 181–205.

2. Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1991), 75–76.

antinomianism and the breakdown of all social controls. But from the internal perspective, Oneida, with its restraints and necessary emphasis on the subordination of the individual to the common good, revealed a strong stress on authority, security, unity, and self-control, and an internal consistency in its continuing search for a middle ground between the untenable extremes of libertinism and repression that were then agitating external society. Because Noyes commented shrewdly and with great perspicacity on the strengths and weaknesses of almost all the major efforts of his day at achieving religious and social reconstruction, his writings provide an unusually sensitive barometer of contemporary social and intellectual concerns. Whitney Cross is correct in asserting that Oneida "is veritably the keystone in the arch of burned-over district history, demonstrating the connection between the enthusiasms of the right and those of the left."[3]

From this starting point, let me reflect on some of the perspectives that John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community may provide on utopia, family, and women.

Underlying Noyes's whole life and sense of mission was a deep-seated concern to overcome the social and intellectual disorder he experienced both in his own life and in the world around him. The areas of New England and western New York where Noyes had his formative emotional and intellectual experiences were undergoing rapid economic growth, unstable social conditions, and sharply conflicting religious movements. As a precocious and strong-willed yet socially maladroit and painfully shy child, Noyes was particularly jarred by the cacophony of ideas and causes that surrounded him. Ultimately, he reached the extraordinary conclusion that he was uniquely responsible for achieving a new religious and social synthesis—both for himself and for others. As he declared in a letter in 1837, "God has set me to cast up a highway across this chaos, and I am gathering out the stones and grading the track as fast as possible".[4]

3. Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800–1850* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1950), 333.

4. George Wallingford Noyes, ed., *Religious Experience of John Humphrey Noyes,*

Although Noyes rejected using the term "utopian" to apply to his efforts, since he argued that he was engaged in a practical, not impractical, effort to help establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth,[5] Noyes's emphasis on the "millennium" is clearly "utopian", if the term is not used pejoratively. As Noyes put it, the first order of priority was to establish "right relations with God", a common set of values or principles.[6] In a striking statement in 1853 about the "principles" that he and his followers held, Noyes observed: "Our fundamental principle is religion".[7] Note that this statement does not say anything about the specific *content* of their religious principles—including specific beliefs about God, Christ, or other topics—but refers only to the *form* of those beliefs. In effect, he is saying that his followers believed in "*having* a religion", that is, in having a common basis of belief. A spirit of solidarity and unity might be deemed essential—or, to put it differently, some common basis for social order had to be accepted as a given—but the specific ways in which core religious and social principles were to be expressed in practice could vary greatly, depending on circumstances.

The essential principle underlying Noyes's religious approach

---

Founder of the Oneida Community (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 308. This was part of Noyes's controversial letter to David Harrison of 15 January 1837 that was published in *The Battle-Axe and Weapons of War*, a countercultural newspaper of the 1830s. For the context of Noyes's early life, see also John Humphrey Noyes, *Confessions of John H. Noyes, Part I: Confession of Religious Experience, Including a History of Modern Perfectionism* (Oneida Reserve, N.Y.: Leonard, 1849); Parker, *Yankee Saint*; and Robert David Thomas, *The Man Who Would Perfect: John Humphrey Noyes and the Utopian Impulse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977).

5. For Noyes's criticism of the Fourierists for their impractical "utopianism", see George Wallingford Noyes, ed., *John Humphrey Noyes: The Putney Community* (Oneida, N.Y.: The Author, 1931), 168.

6. Noyes outlined the fourfold and integrally interconnected problems he was attempting to correct in "The Bible Argument Defining the Relations Between the Sexes in the Kingdom of Heaven", in *First Annual Report of the Oneida Association* (Oneida Reserve, N.Y.: Leonard, 1849), 27–28.

7. *Bible Communism: A Compilation of the Annual Reports and Other Publications of the Oneida Association and its Branches* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Office of *The Circular*, 1853), 6.

was what he described as the "anti-legality of the Gospel", or in other terms, the notion that faith has higher priority than works. The article "Paul Not Carnal", printed shortly after Noyes's conversion to "perfect holiness" in New Haven in February 1834, conveys this belief, which underlay the rest of his life.[8] Like Luther, Noyes had driven himself to try to achieve impossible standards of legalistic perfection; and like Luther, Noyes eventually came to the conclusion that the perfection God demanded was based not on external works but on internal attitude. Actions in and of themselves were neither good nor bad, except in terms of what they meant to individuals and to God.

Such beliefs left plenty of room for misunderstandings and self-deception, as Noyes discovered during the next decade of struggling with the resultant problems in himself and among other Perfectionists who wanted to be freed from moral restraint without taking responsibility for their lives. At Brimfield, Massachusetts, in 1834, for example, the Perfectionists Mary Lincoln and Maria Brown decided to show that their piety could overcome carnal desires by sleeping chastely in the same bed with a visiting evangelist. Noyes, who had been at Brimfield earlier with the same evangelist, had felt so threatened by the atmosphere there that he had left precipitously before the "Brimfield bundling" scandal broke, making his way home some sixty miles through bitter cold and snow to his home in Putney, Vermont, in less than twenty-four hours.[9]

As early as 1839, Noyes recognized the necessity for adequate controls over behavior, cautioning: "Observe that the doctrine here delivered, is not that 'believers under the Gospel dispensation, are delivered from the obligation of personal obedience to moral law' but that the *external* application of the moral law, which worketh, not obedience, but wrath, is exchanged for the internal admin-

8. *The Perfectionist* 1 (20 October 1834): 11. This article is most readily available as reprinted in John Humphrey Noyes, *The Berean: A Manual for the Help of Those Who Seek the Faith of the Primitive Church* (Putney, Vt.: Office of the *Spiritual Magazine*, 1847).

9. For treatments of the Brimfield episode, see G. W. Noyes, ed., *Religious Experience of John Humphrey Noyes*, 195–210; and Parker, *Yankee Saint*, 35–38.

Oneida Community members at their Summer House, ca. 1866.

istration of it, which secures its fulfilment."[10] In effect, both at Putney and Oneida, external social restraints were eventually given less importance than internal self-restraint, though complex means of control also were instituted.

If one sets aside the specific practices at Oneida and focuses instead on the basic philosophy that underlay the Community, Noyes's stress on setting up a common value base first and on being flexible in attempting to realize underlying values in practice seems compelling to those interested in profound and long-lasting social

10. *The Witness* 1 (25 September 1839): 78.

reconstruction. Although Rosabeth Kanter in *Commitment and Community* has argued that successful communities are characterized by effective "commitment mechanisms", this argument largely puts the cart before the horse in my opinion.[11] The first order of business, instead, must be to find a common sense of mission and priorities. Only then can an individual or group seek effectively for ways to implement those priorities. Similarly, in implementing a set of priorities, it is essential to keep always in mind the underlying spirit rather than rigidly to follow preconceived schemes about what must be done. Even during its last decade, when one might have expected the Oneida Community to have ossified, external observers such as Charles Nordhoff commented about the extraordinary flexibility of the Community in everything from work assignments to recreation to meal schedules, and its strong desire to avoid getting locked into routines.[12] This was one of the Community's greatest strengths. It was always ready to find the best possible way to achieve its underlying goals in practice.

A second topic on which Noyes's thought and the experience of Oneida can inspire present-day reflection has to do with the issue of "family". When Noyes talked about "family", he meant far more than the word normally denotes. Not only for Oneida, but to a considerable extent for the other millenarian groups I have studied such as the Shakers and Mormons, the word "family" was expanded to include the entire face-to-face, *Gemeinschaft*-type community.[13] Noyes argued that the nuclear family by itself was too limited. He saw himself, instead, trying to create an "enlarged

11. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972). For a discussion of the limitations of Kanter's criteria for "success" and "failure" of communities, see Jon Wagner, "Success in Intentional Communities: The Problem of Evaluation", *Communal Societies* 5 (1985): 89–100.

12. Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1875), 286.

13. For a summary of this argument, see Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), 237–40.

family", overcoming the isolation and selfishness that were an almost inevitable concomitant of the nuclear family in a highly individualistic society.[14]

As Noyes put it so eloquently: "Our Communities are families, as distinctly bounded and separated from promiscuous society as ordinary households. The tie that binds us together is as permanent and sacred, to say the least, as that of marriage, for it is our religion. We receive no members (except by deception or mistake) who do not give their heart and hand to the family interest for life and forever. Community of property extends just as far as freedom of love."[15] And as the Community hymn put it: "[W]e all have one home and one family relation".[16] Abel Easton was exaggerating but little when he described Oneida as "a home the like of which has not been seen since the world began".[17]

One of Noyes's most intellectually provocative articles was his 1854 piece on "The Family and its Foil".[18] In it, he asserted that "marriage", in its present form, was antagonistic to the "family". By this rather startling statement, he meant that existing patterns of marriage, which grew out of romantic love, frequently separated a couple geographically, emotionally, and socially from their "family"—that is, their parents and larger kinship and community ties. Such marriages based on romantic love contributed to the fragmentation of social relations. As Noyes saw it, love attachments confined to individuals were a form of "egotism for two", part of the same disruptive and antisocial individualism that was rep-

14. John Humphrey Noyes went so far as to maintain in his *History of American Socialisms* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1870), p. 23, that the main idea underlying the efforts of both the secular and religious associationists in antebellum America was "the enlargement of home—the extension of family union beyond the little man-and-wife circle to large corporations". (Italics in original removed.)

15. *Handbook of the Oneida Community* (Wallingford, Conn.: Office of *The Circular*, 1867), 64.

16. Nordhoff, *Communistic Societies*, 299.

17. Alan Estlake [Abel Easton], *The Oneida Community* (London: George Redway, 1900), 56.

18. "The Family and its Foil", *The Circular* (16 November 1854), 594. See also "Becoming as Little Children", *Spiritual Magazine* 2 (22 December 1849): 339.

resented by the spirit of rampant acquisitiveness in antebellum America.

How were the disruptive aspects of such romantic love to be dealt with constructively? Further individualistic fragmentation—for instance, free love outside a community context—was no solution. Instead of causing community disruption, powerful sexual forces of attraction should be given natural channels and harnessed to provide a vital bond within society. Noyes wanted all believers to be unified and to share a perfect community of interests, to replace the "I-spirit" with the "we-spirit". If believers were fully to love each other while living in close communal association, they must be allowed to love each other fervently and physically, "not by pairs, as in the world, but en masse". The necessary restrictions of the earthly state, governed by arbitrary human law, would eventually have to give way to the final heavenly free state, governed by the spirit in which "hostile surroundings and powers of bondage cease" and "all restrictions also will cease". A perfect unity in all respects would result. Each would be married to all—heart, mind, and body—in a complex marriage.[19]

The appeal of such an approach—and its severe limitations—are not hard to discern. The mystical desire for total union with and submersion in the universe is one of the most fundamental drives underlying religious experience. In its often distorted forms in human sexual intercourse, it has incredible complexity and power as well. The anthropologist Victor Turner has eloquently and evocatively analyzed the role of rites of passage and the liminal or transitional state between two modes of being or ways of living in the world.[20] The raw power and intensity of emotion released during

19. "Bible Argument", 21–22; Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 626–27.

20. Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969). For an application of Turner's approach to new religious movements, see J. Gordon Melton and Robert L. Moore, *The Cult Experience: Responding to the New Religious Pluralism* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982). Also suggestive in this context are Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (New York: Schocken, 1969); and Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements", *American Anthropologist* 38 (April 1956): 264–81.

Oneida woman and child,
ca. 1860.

the transition state when neither the old nor the new status is in effect can be extraordinary. A profound state of communion can result from the breakdown of existing structures. Equally noteworthy is the potential for destructive expression and self-delusion in such states. To sustain a community such as Oneida that sought, in effect, to keep the fluidity and emotional intensity of such a transitional state over a long period of time is extraordinarily difficult and dangerous. Yet Oneida shows, if any community can, that there can be great appeal in "the pursuit of an impossible ideal" in which all arbitrary distinctions between individuals are broken down as part of an effort to realize a higher union.

On a more mundane level, Noyes's analysis of the family makes a key point for us today. All too often, we talk about "the family" as if it existed in isolation from the larger society. We talk about "family breakdown" and assume that individuals bear primary or even sole responsibility for such failure. Noyes, as well as some of the

most articulate recent critics of the family such as Stephanie Coontz in her recent book *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, make the critically important point that the nuclear family is not and cannot exist in isolation from the larger social order. Larger social problems often exacerbate, even cause, difficulties in the nuclear family. And no effort to improve the family can be successful unless it is placed into the larger context of overall social reconstruction.[21]

A final topic on which the experiences of Noyes and the Oneida Community raises significant questions for us today is the issue of women and their roles. If reestablishing "right relations with God" —a sense of common values that could link together an "enlarged family" or community—constituted the first priority for Noyes, then his second, closely related goal was reestablishing "right relations between the sexes".[22] As an extremely shy young adult, Noyes had struggled to understand his own impulses and to determine why so many of the Perfectionists with whom he associated were engaged in such erratic and often self-destructive sexual experimentation. The existing marriage system was unsatisfactory, he concluded: "The law of marriage worketh wrath".[23] Unrealistic and unnatural restrictions were being placed on relations between the sexes. In marriage, women were held in a form of slave-like domestic bondage, while their husbands toiled away in an uncertain and highly competitive external world.[24] Romantic love and the monogamous family merely accentuated the disruptive individualism present in other areas of society. Most serious of all, men acted as though they owned their wives, as though their wives were a form of property. Noyes felt, instead, that sexual and emotional exclusiveness between the sexes should be done away with.

21. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

22. "Bible Argument", 27–28.

23. Ibid., 25.

24. *Slavery and Marriage, A Dialogue: Conversation Between Judge North, Major South and Mr. Free Church* (Oneida, N.Y.: Oneida Community, 1850); "The Family and its Foil"; and *Bible Communism*, 79–80.

Within the ideal order he was attempting to set up, sexual relations should be fundamentally restructured so that loyalty was raised to the level of the entire Community.[25]

The details of this remarkable effort at reorganizing marriage and family relations have been treated in many accounts and need not concern us here. What does need to be stressed, however, is both the systematic and the institutionally radical character of Noyes's innovations. Once basic community loyalty and the necessary institutional supports had been established over a period of nearly a decade, Noyes proceeded to introduce the practice of complex marriage and a variety of other radical changes that attempted to do away with all nonintrinsic distinctions between the sexes. Women were formally freed to participate in almost all aspects of Community religious, economic, and social life, in contrast to the far greater restrictions that they faced in the outside world. Within the limits deemed necessary to maintain the primary loyalty to the larger communal order, all individuals were encouraged to develop their highest capacities. Few societies in human history have done more to break down arbitrary distinctions between the sexes than did Oneida.[26]

It might initially seem paradoxical that this significant revision in sex roles and women's status at Oneida should have been accomplished in the face of John Humphrey Noyes's formal belief in the superiority of men over women. The chief reason this could occur was that Noyes's primary concern was not with male and female authority patterns per se, but rather with establishing his own personal authority over all his followers, both men and women. So

25. See "Bible Argument"; *Bible Communism; Handbook of the Oneida Community* (1867), 64; and *Handbook of the Oneida Community* (Oneida, N.Y.: Oneida Community, 1871), 56.

26. Parker, *Yankee Saint*; Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1969); Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*; and Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981) discuss the ways in which sex roles and daily activities were modified at Oneida. Even Dalsimer's critical account, "Women and Family in the Oneida Community", 242–77, shows that significant changes were made in women's work at Oneida.

long as Noyes's male and female followers unquestioningly acknowledged his paternalistic, God-like authority, he was prepared to be flexible in delegating that authority and making major changes in the interests of both sexes.[27] No one way of organizing relations between the sexes was sacrosanct; the underlying spirit rather than any specific external form was Noyes's concern. In effect, therefore, both men and women at Oneida shared a common personal and religious commitment that radically undercut normal social restrictions. Woman's primary responsibility was not to her husband or to her children, but to God—and all souls were ultimately equal before God.[28]

Even though Noyes may have succeeded in resolving many problems that he and his followers faced by setting up a close-knit community, the question still remains how his activities related to the larger society and its concerns. In particular, several points need to be made about Noyes's response to the contemporary women's rights movement. One is that Noyes was genuinely sympathetic to many of the basic goals of antebellum feminists. He not only argued that relations between the sexes were out of joint, but also felt that a major reason for that disruption was the restricted role assigned to women. As a former abolitionist with ties to William Lloyd Garrison, he explicitly compared woman's status to that of a slave and used other language as vivid as that of the most militant feminists.[29] Such writing was more than mere rhetoric unsupported by action. Noyes saw himself as a figure with a mission to free women (as well as men) from servitude to stereotyped behaviors and attitudes, and he made specific and often highly controversial changes at every level of community life to end discrimination

27. The overriding concern that Noyes had with his own personal authority and control is stressed in *Spiritual Magazine* 2 (11 July 1842): 57–59, and by George Wallingford Noyes, ed. *John Humphrey Noyes*, 25–33. Also see Thomas's observation in his *The Man Who Would Be Perfect*, and Richard De Maria, *Communal Love at Oneida: A Perfectionist Vision of Authority, Property, and Sexual Order* (New York: Mellen, 1978).

28. "Woman's Slavery to Children", *Spiritual Magazine* 1 (15 September 1846): 109–10.

29. The important linkage between Noyes and Garrison is analyzed in John L. Thomas, *William Lloyd Garrison* (Boston: Little Brown, 1963), 228–32.

against women, encourage their participation, and reestablish harmonious relations between the sexes.[30]

Yet while Noyes was in general agreement with much of the feminist diagnosis of the illness affecting relations between men and women, he was in sharp disagreement with its prescription for cure. Feminist stridency and emphasis on conflict between the sexes as a method of social change particularly repelled him and his followers. A note in the Community newspaper in 1850, for example, mentioned a women's rights convention in Ohio at which Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke and compared married women's legal status to that of slaves. The paper editorialized: "There is an oblique pointing at the truth in this statement, but it is far from probing the real depths of the case. . . . What is really wanted is to be able to live under the government of God, to establish mutually satisfying relations between the sexes."[31] The point was to achieve the necessary and desirable changes in the right manner, one that would contribute to restoring harmonious relations between all parties involved in the conflict.

Like conservatives such as Catharine Beecher who helped to articulate and establish the Victorian synthesis, with its emphasis on the family, domesticity, and women's power in the home sphere, Noyes felt that the whole social order was threatening to come apart. New and more satisfying roles for men and women must be established, but this must be done in such a way that the divisiveness and conflict that were already so rampant in society could be minimized. Noyes achieved such a new synthesis for himself and his followers by creating a communal family at Oneida. The larger society, in the meantime, achieved much the same effect by making use of the nuclear family in conjunction with larger institutional agencies for social control such as churches, schools, and asylums. The specifics of their programs might differ, but in a curious way both Noyes and the larger Victorian society were alike in

30. "Woman Suppression", *The Circular* (27 March 1854), 298. The optimistic tone of this article is also characteristic of many of Noyes's other statements on this topic.

31. Susan C. Hamilton, "Communism, Woman's Best Friend", *The Circular* (27 May 1854), 298. This line of argument is repeated on numerous occasions.

seeking to use essentially conservative means to achieve ways of life that differed greatly from those that had come before.[32]

Does such an approach have any continuing resonance for us today? A decade ago, many feminists would have said "No". It appeared to them that Noyes was, at best, attempting to co-opt and weaken serious efforts to improve women's status. With the passage of time, however, a certain mellowing seems to be occurring, at least among some feminist writers who have become increasingly aware of the difficulty of "having it all", trying to engage in high-powered and successful careers and, at the same time, to sustain a full and rewarding domestic life. Under such circumstances, feminist writers such as Ellen Wayland-Smith and others have been more impressed by how much rather than how little the Community was able to achieve.[33] Without directly reentering the debate again at this time, let me simply argue that perhaps the greatest value of Oneida for contemporary feminists is that it raises and highlights many of the difficult questions of women's roles, without providing any definitive answers to them.

For more than three decades at Oneida, John Humphrey Noyes and his followers struggled with complex issues of social organization, not simply in theory but also in practice. They attempted to modify extremely deep-seated sexual attitudes and behavior patterns, and they did make important (if ultimately temporary) changes in the relations between men and women. On the other

32. For a suggestion of the striking similarities between Noyes's approach and that of conservatives such as Catharine Beecher, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973), especially 151–67.

33. Ellen Wayland-Smith, "The Status and Self-Perception of Women in the Oneida Community", *Communal Societies* 8 (1988): 18–53, makes use of the perspectives of Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theories and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982) to argue that Noyes put forward an essentially "feminine" model for his female and male followers. Using extensive primary writings by women at Oneida, she concludes that by putting into practice a society emphasizing an ethic of connection and self-sacrifice to maintain the good of the group, Noyes helped bolster women's self-perceptions, allowing them a richer and more fully integrated experience than most women in the outer world found possible.

hand, Noyes and his followers certainly did not achieve an egalitarian millennium (nor was that their intention). Those historians who would treat the Oneida experiment as a "failure" simply because it did not achieve absolute "perfection" (in whatever sense perfection is being defined) are unrealistic in their expectations and their understanding of the way in which social change takes place. Noyes was a doer as well as a thinker. He sought, as much as possible, to approximate what he conceived to be the ideal community, but he was also aware of the limitations and strengths of the human beings with whom he was working. John Humphrey Noyes, his communities, and his philosophy deserve the kind of serious scholarly attention that they have only recently begun to receive.